



# 2022 Annual Report



## **Introduction**

The primary responsibility of the Lee County Coroner's Office is to investigate and certify the manner and cause of death of those who have died in Lee County or in instances in which the events related to a person's death originated in Lee County.

The Coroner and all appointed staff have responsibility and authority granted by Code of Alabama, 1975, § 11-5-1, et seq.; § 45-41-6; et al.

Deaths investigated by the Coroner's Office include, but are not limited to:

- Sudden, unexpected, or unexplained deaths
- Deaths that occur under violent or suspicious circumstances.
- Deaths suspected to have resulted from disease, contagion, or pathogen which may be hazardous, or which may constitute a threat to the health of the general public
- Deaths where no physician is in attendance, or where, though in attendance, the physician is unable to certify the cause of death
- Deaths from thermal, chemical, or radiation injury
- Deaths occurring while in the custody of law enforcement officials or while incarcerated in a public institution
- Deaths from an industrial accident or deaths suspected too involved with or related to the decedent's occupation
- Deaths that occur in a hospital less than 24 hours after admission or after any invasive procedure
- Death suspected to be related to drug and/or alcohol intoxication or the result of exposure to drugs or toxic agents
- Deaths due to neglect or suspected neglect
- Death of a fetus of 20 or more weeks gestational age that is unattended by a physician
- Any maternal death to include death of a pregnant woman regardless of the length of the pregnancy, and up to six weeks (or one year) post-delivery, even where the cause of death is unrelated to the pregnancy
- Any death of an infant or child where the medical history has not established a significant pre-existing condition

Daniel Sexton was appointed Special Coroner in early July 2022, after the unexpected death of long time Coroner Bill Harris. A true public servant, Coroner Harris left a long history of compassionate service to the citizens of Lee County, having served as Coroner for more than 24 years as well as a Paramedic with East Alabama Medical Center for many years.

Upon being appointed Special Coroner, Daniel Sexton made an initial goal increasing efficacy and citizen service by modernizing the operations of the Coroner's Office without sacrificing Coroner Harris' history of compassion.

The first step was the introduction of software and the internet to collect data related to the cases being investigated by the Coroner's Office. Prior to August 10, 2022, the Coroner's Office was still working on a pen and paper system with no central or searchable records keeping system. While our software transformation is not complete, these first steps of modernization have allowed for this report to be complied, as we simply would not have been able to compile the data and create such a report from the old pen and paper records.

Additionally, Special Coroner Sexton sought to modernize the Office, increase efficiency, increase citizen service through the introduction of Standard Policies and Procedures. This included creating standardized forms and processes, introduction of uniforms and ID cards, education standards that exceed the state mandated minimums, and more.

On January 16, 2023, Special Coroner Sexton, became Coroner Sexton and started his first 4-year term.

## Coroner's Office Personnel

Daniel Sexton      Coroner

Brad Whetstone Deputy Coroner

Zack Harrelson Deputy Coroner

The coroner and/or a Deputy Coroner are on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Presently each Coroner or Deputy Coroner is on-call for approximately 168 hours per month and answers all death investigation calls during his time on call.

In addition to on-call time each Deputy Coroner spends about 40 hours per month on legally required administrative tasks related to the death investigation calls they are assigned. Coroner Sexton spends about 160 hours on month on legally required administrative tasks.

## Goals of the Coroner's Office

These are the goals that Coroner Sexton would like to achieve during his first term of office. These goals won't happen overnight and because of the complexity of funding and availability these aren't necessary in a specific order.

- Continue to provide caring, compassionate, and family centered services to the citizens of Lee County who have lost a loved one
- Become the 3<sup>rd</sup> Coroner's Office in Alabama to be accredited by the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME).
  - Accreditation ensures that nationally set standards of Death Investigation are followed and operations of the office meet all criteria put forth by our national organizations.
- Complete software implementation to track cases, statics, and decedents.
- Continue education of all staff and maintain education levels above the state mandated minimums.
  - Currently state law only requires 12 hours of training annually.
  - The Coroner's Office needs specific training or continuing education in the following: general death investigation, infant/child deaths, elderly abuse/neglect, cause of death determination, blood pattern analysis, homicide investigation, MVC investigations, Work place/industrial accidents
- Establish a county morgue for storage of decedents
  - State law makes the Coroner responsible for the storage of decedents prior to transportation to the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences in Montgomery for an autopsy.
  - The Lee County Coroner's Office has traditionally used local funeral homes (private for-profit businesses) for the storage and transportation of decedents. This practice, at best, creates the appearance of a conflict of interest, favoritism, and unethical conduct, and at worst maybe illegal under Alabama Law.
  - This practice also creates questionable chain of custody in legal cases, whereas the Coroner who has the legal custody of a body (evidence), is storing that evidence inside a commercial for profit business.

- The Coroner's Office also needs to place to store unclaimed decedents while the search for next of kin is taking place
  - In a growing number of cases, the Coroner's Office needs to store decedents until the family is able to decide which funeral home they would like to use
- Establish a county transportation of decedents
  - State law makes the Coroner responsible for the transportation of decedents to and from the Alabama Department of Forensic Sciences in Montgomery for an autopsy.
  - The Lee County Coroner's Office has traditionally used local funeral homes (private for-profit businesses) for the transportation of decedents. This practice, at best, creates the appearance of a conflict of interest, favoritism, and unethical conduct, and at worst maybe illegal under Alabama Law.
  - This practice also creates questionable chain of custody in legal cases, whereas the Coroner who has the legal custody of a body (evidence), is storing that evidence inside a commercial for profit business.
- Budget for proper compensation
  - Presently even with a raise granted by the County Commission for FY2023, Deputy Coroner's only make about \$750 per month. This is less than \$3.70 cents per hour.
  - Deputy Coroner's are paid as 10-99 employees and are not eligible for health insurance or any other benefits.
  - The Coroner and Deputy Coroner's must use their own gas and automobile and insurance to conduct county business.
  - No other county departments or employees with similar legally required responsibilities and/or duties are expected to carry out those responsibilities and/or duties
- Actively Participate in and advocate for the Alabama State Coroner's Association
  - Effectively advocate for Coroner's statewide with the legislature
- Maintain and grow our relationship with local governmental entities like the County Commission, Law Enforcement, EMA, EMS, Fire, and District Attorney
- Maintain and grow our relationship with state agencies such as ADPH and ADFS
- Leverage technology to increase efficiency and service

- Effectively advocate for the Coroner's Office at the County Commission by providing accurate data to justify needs
- Maintain and grow our relationship with Local Funeral Homes, Hospitals, Hospice, and other facilities
- Continue to improve the professional image of this Office in the Community

**Note:** While this report is titled "2022 Annual Report" it only includes data from August 10, 2022 – December 31, 2022, due to the lack of a computerized recording keeping system prior to August 10, 2022. Future "annual reports" will in fact contain 12 months of data.

## **Total Deaths by Manner**

State law recognizes 5 different manners of death. Every death must be categorized into one of these 5 manners of death.

<b>Manner of Death</b>		
Natural	140	73%
Homicide	8	4%
Accident	21	11%
Suicide	15	8%
Undetermined	7	4%
	191	

## **Total Deaths by Cause**

While State Law only recognizes 5 Manners of Death, there is a virtually unlimited number of Causes of Death. We have organized the 191 cases we investigated into 16 broad & general categories.

<b>Cause of Death</b>		
Carcinoma	15	8%
Cardiovascular Disease	80	42%
Cerebrovascular Disease	5	3%
Covid-19	5	3%
Drowning	1	1%
Fall	2	1%
Gunshot	18	9%
Hanging	2	1%
Hepatic Disease	5	3%
Motor Vehicle Accident	10	5%
Other	4	2%
Overdose	9	5%
Peptic Disease	3	2%
Pulmonary Disease	13	7%
Renal Disease	12	6%
Undetermined	7	4%
	191	

## Unnatural Deaths:

	<b>GSW</b>	<b>Hanging</b>	<b>MVC</b>	<b>Drowning</b>	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Overdose</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
Homicide	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Suicide	10	2	0	1	0	2	0	15
Accident	0	0	10	0	2	7	2	21
	18	2	10	1	2	9	2	44

## Homicides:

<b>Cause of Death</b>		
Gunshot	8	100%
	8	

## Suicides:

<b>Cause of Death Suicide</b>		
Gunshot	10	67%
Hanging	2	13%
Drowning	1	7%
Overdose	2	13%
	15	

## Accidents:

<b>Cause of Death Accident</b>		
Overdose	7	33%
Motor Vehicle Accident	10	48%
Fall	2	10%
Other	2	10%
	21	

## Accidental Overdoes:

<b>Fentanyl</b>			<b>Age Group</b>		<b>Fentanyl Overdose</b>		<b>Sex</b>	
Yes	6	86%	20-39	2	33%		Male	6
No	1	14%	40-59	4	67%		Female	1
Total	7		Total	6			Total	7

## MVA Deaths:

Age Group	0-19	20-39	40-59	60-79	80+
Age Group	1	5	2	1	1

Sex	Male	Female
Sex	6	4

Race	White	Black
Race	6	4

Drugs and/or Alcohol	Yes	No
Drugs and/or Alcohol	60%	40%

## Autopsy:

	Total Cases	Autopsy	% of Total Case	% of Autopsy
Homicide	8	8	100%	16%
Suicide	15	12	80%	24%
Accident	21	12	57%	24%
Natural	140	10	7%	20%
Undetermined	7	7	100%	14%
	191	49	26%	

	Autopsy	Coroner Attended	% Attended
Homicide	8	7	88%
Suicide	12	3	25%
Accident	12	1	8%
Natural	10	2	20%
Undetermined	7	3	43%
	49	16	33%

## Child Deaths:

	<b>Homicide</b>	<b>Suicide</b>	<b>Natural</b>	<b>Undetermined</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>≤17 y/o</b>	1	1	2	3	7
	14%	14%	29%	43%	

## Child Death Autopsies:

	<b>Homicide</b>	<b>Suicide</b>	<b>Natural</b>	<b>Undetermined</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>≤ 17 y/o</b>	1	1	1	3	6
	100%	100%	50%	100%	86%

## Scene Response by Lee County Coroner's Office:

	<b>Total Cases</b>	<b>Daniel</b>	<b>Zack</b>	<b>Brad</b>	<b>Bill</b>	<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>% Responded to</b>
Homicide	8	4	0	3	1	8	100%
Suicide	15	5	0	6	4	15	100%
Accident	21	6	7	5	3	21	100%
Natural	140	33	16	31	16	96	69%
Undetermined	7	4	1	2	0	7	100%
	191	52	24	47	24	147	77%

## **Demographics:**

### **Sex of Decedent:**

	<b>Total Cases</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Homicide	8	8	0
Suicide	15	9	6
Accident	21	16	5
Natural	140	84	56
Undetermined	7	4	3
	<b>191</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>70</b>

### **Race of Decedent:**

	<b>Total Cases</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Other</b>
Homicide	8	0	7	1	0	0
Suicide	15	12	2	0	0	1
Accident	21	16	4	0	0	1
Natural	140	87	49	2	2	0
Undetermined	7	4	2	1	0	0
	<b>191</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

### **Age of Decedent:**

	<b>Total Cases</b>	<b>0-19</b>	<b>20-39</b>	<b>40-59</b>	<b>60-79</b>	<b>80+</b>
Homicide	8	1	5	2	0	0
Suicide	15	2	5	5	3	0
Accident	21	2	8	6	4	1
Natural	140	2	8	30	75	25
Undetermined	7	3	2	1	1	0
	<b>191</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>26</b>

## **Cremation Permits:**

Code of Alabama 22-9A-16(a) requires the County Coroner to sign cremation permits for all deaths that occurred in the county. This includes hospice deaths, inpatient deaths, and deaths where a physician has signed the death certificate. (non-coroner cases)

Cremation Permits Signed: 179